

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 7532

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PBOR, PN
SUBJECT: PLEBISCITE PREVIEW

REF: PANAMA 6012

SUMMARY: IT LOOKS AS THOUGH THE "SI'S" WILL HAVE IT IN
SUNDAY'S PLEBISCITE. THE CANAL TREATIES SHOULD BE APPROVED
COMFORTABLY. THE CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN HEATED AND
GENERALLY FAIR. WE EXPECT THAT NEITHER THE VOTE NOR THE
COUNT WILL BE SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECTED BY FRAUD. END SUMMARY

1. BARRING A MIRACLE, PANAMANIAN VOTERS WILL VOTE OVER-
WHELMINGLY SUNDAY TO APPROVE THE "TORRIJOS-CARTER" TREATIES.
NO ONE CAN DO MUCH MORE THAN MAKE AN EDUCATED GUESS ABOUT
HOW MUCH THE MARGIN WILL BE. MOST PEOPLE WITH WHOM WE HAVE
TALKED WOULD AGREE THAT IF THE GOVERNMENT GETS LESS THAN
TWO-THIRDS OF THE VOTES, IT HAS DONE POORLY. IF IT SHOULD
GET AS MUCH AS 80 PERCENT, IT HAS DONE VERY WELL.

2. EVEN SO, THERE IS MORE OPPOSITION TO THE TREATIES
THAN WE THOUGHT THERE WOULD BE WHEN WE FIRST TRIED TO
ANALYZE THE PROBABLE OUTCOME TWO MONTHS AGO. (SEE
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PANAMA 3304 AND 3305.) THE MAIN REASON IS THAT FREEDOM
OF DISCUSSION OF THE TREATY HAS BEEN MUCH GREATER THAN
WE HAD EXPECTED. THE CORE OF OPPOSITION TO THE TREATIES
HAS BEEN AND CONTINUES TO BE 1) STUDENTS AND OTHER
HIGHLY NATIONALISTIC ELEMENTS AND 2) LEADERS OF THE OLD
POLITICAL CLASS. A THIRD CLUSTER OF OPPOSITION --
THOSE WHO STAND TO BENEFIT FROM THE STATUS QUO (E.G.,

CANAL EMPLOYEES) -- IS SMALL AND HAS BEEN ABSENT FROM THE NATIONAL DEBATE.

3. THE SINCERITY OF MANY OF THE NON-MARXIST OPPONENTS OF THE TREATY IS OPEN TO QUESTION. SOME OF THEM RECOGNIZE THAT THE TREATY PACKAGE IS ABOUT AS GOOD AS THEY CAN HOPE TO GET FROM THE U.S., BUT THEY FEAR THAT ITS APPROVAL WILL SHORE UP TORRIJOS' REGIME: "WE LOSE THE GRINGOS IN PERPETUITY AND IN RETURN GET OMAR IN PERPETUITY."

4. BE THAT AS IT MAY, THE OPPOSITION -- BE IT FROM THE LEFT, THE RIGHT OR THE CENTER -- HAS SWARMED LIKE FLIES TO HONEY TOWARD THOSE PARTS OF THE TREATY WHICH RUB PANAMANIAN'S THE WRONG WAY. THE NEUTRALITY TREATY AND THE ALLEGED RIGHT OF INTERVENTION WHICH IT GIVES TO THE U.S., IS THE MOST POPULAR TARGET. THE CONTINUATION OF U.S. BASES UNTIL 1999, THE MANY RESTRICTIONS ON PANAMA'S RIGHT TO EXERCISE JURISDICTION OVER THE ZONE DURING THE LIFE OF THE TREATY, AND DOZENS OF OTHER POINTS HAVE COME UNDER ATTACK.

5. THE GOVERNMENT AND OTHER TREATY SUPPORTERS HAVE COUNTERATTACKED WITH AS PRETTY A PICTURE OF THE "CONQUESTS" IN THE TREATY AS THEY CAN PAINT. AND OF COURSE THEY HAVE A HIGHLY PERSUASIVE ARGUMENT: LIKE OLD AGE, THE

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TREATIES ARE VASTLY SUPERIOR TO THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE.

6. UNSURPRISINGLY, THE PRO-TREATY FORCES ARE MUCH BETTER ORGANIZED THAN OPPONENTS. THEY HAVE SATURATED GOVERNMENT WORKERS WITH THEIR SIDE OF THE ARGUMENT. AFTER A RATHER SLOW START, PRO-TREATY FORCES ARE NOW EFFECTIVELY UTILIZING PRESS, RADIO AND TELEVISION TO PLUMP FOR THE TREATY. THE GOVERNMENT HAS DONE A GREAT DEAL TO GET OUT THE VOTE. THERE ARE MORE POSTERS IN PANAMA CITY URGING PANAMANIAN'S TO VOTE "YES OR NO" THAN THERE ARE PARTISAN POSTERS.

7. THE OPPOSITION HAS RELIED ON THE FORBEARANCE OF THE GOVERNMENT TO ALLOW IT TO GIVE ITS SIDE IN THE MEDIA (THOUGH PUBLIC MEETINGS HAVE ALSO PLAYED A SMALL PART). IN THIS, THE GOVERNMENT HAS COOPERATED VERY WELL INDEED-- EVEN TO THE POINT OF PROVIDING FREE NEWSPAPER SPACE AND TV TIME. FOR SEVERAL WEEKS, THERE WAS MORE ANTI-TREATY THAN PRO-TREATY MATERIAL IN THE MEDIA. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE GOVERNMENT SEEMS TO HAVE BEGUN ABOUT A WEEK AGO TO CUT DOWN ON THE AMOUNT OF ANTI-TREATY MATERIAL IN ALL MEDIA. AS A RESULT, THE OPPOSITION HAS BEGUN

TO COMPLAIN THAT IT IS BEING MUZZLED.

8. ALTHOUGH IT IS THE RAINY SEASON, WE EXPECT A GOOD TURNOUT--PROBABLY BETWEEN 80 AND 90 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE. PRESUMABLY, THE HIGHER THE TURNOUT, THE BETTER FOR THE TREATY, SINCE APOLITICAL VOTERS (THE MOST LIKELY TO STAY HOME) ARE NOT INCLINED TO BUCK THE GOVERNMENT BY VOTING NO. THE ANTI'S WILL PROBABLY DO BEST IN PANAMA CITY AND DAVID, WORST IN THE BOONDOCKS.

9. WHILE SOME FRAUD IS POSSIBLE, WE DOUBT THAT IT WILL BE SIGNIFICANT IN THE OVERALL PICTURE. AS FAR AS WE CAN TELL, THE GOVERNMENT--CONFIDENT IT IS GOING TO CONFIDENTIAL

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WIN BIG--IS DOING ALL IT CAN TO MAKE THE PLEBISCITE FREE AND FAIR. WHAT IS VIRTUALLY CERTAIN IS THAT THERE WILL BE CRIES OF FOUL FROM TREATY OPPONENTS.

10. TO A CERTAIN DEGREE, THE PLEBISCITE HAS BECOME A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE IN THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT. TORRIJOS HAS EVEN INDICATED HE WOULD RESIGN IF IT LOSES. BUT, IN OUR JUDGMENT, MOST VOTERS WILL BE EXPRESSING THEIR VIEWS STRAIGHTFORWARDLY ON THE TREATIES THEMSELVES.

11. COMMENT: IF THE PANAMANIAN PEOPLE VOTE OVERWHELMINGLY FOR THE TREATIES IN A PATENTLY FAIR PLEBISCITE, IT WILL STRONGLY UNDERLINE THE TREATIES' LEGITIMACY (AND THUS ACCEPTABILITY) TO THE NEXT GENERATION OF PANAMANIAN AND TO FUTURE GOVERNMENTS.
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